When I think of the idea of family, I think of the relationships of kin and belonging and of the ties that sustain us as social and spiritual beings. As I have said elsewhere,

“"I am not an individual; I am an integral part of the cosmos. I share divinity with my ancestors, the land, the seas and the skies. I am not an individual, because I share my tofi (an inheritance) with my family, my village and my nation. I belong to my family and my family belongs to me. I belong to my village and my village belongs to me. I belong to my nation and my nation belongs to me. This is the essence of my belonging”.1

A lot has been said about the strengths and challenges of Pasifika families. Questions about what constitutes a Pasifika or Samoan family are important to ask. Determining what kinds of help to give families, which families need more help and why, are fundamental to the good of society.

When I say that I am not an individual, I do not mean that my individual happiness is not important. The ideals of family in the Samoan context

---

are shaped by respect for each person’s mental, physical, social and spiritual wellbeing. It is the responsibility of the family, especially the heads of families, to make sure that each person in the family is happy.

In my Samoan indigenous reference, each member of the family has an inheritance, including individual gifts and talents that are bestowed from God, nurtured within the family and shared with the community. Individual talents are used for the benefit of the whole. Ensuring that the good of the whole is always just requires competent and vigilant family heads, capable of commanding authority or pule on the one hand, and demonstrating grace and personal integrity on the other.

When preparing for this address I kept thinking about what it is that holds families together and keeps them well despite the turbulences of life? How have the values of a Samoan family survived such turbulences? How have we named and captured these values? How do we celebrate the joys of family? How do we cope with its challenges, paradoxes, ironies and riddles?

Sometimes the best way to provide an answer to hard questions is by telling a story. I want to share some stories told to me by some of the survivors and counsellors of Samoa’s recent tsunami to help illustrate the point about the power and fragility of family and of the importance of understanding and nurturing what is best in families.

**Family as source of love**

A few days after the tsunami, my wife and I went to visit the hospital where some of the survivors were and I was told a profoundly moving
story by a grandmother who was grieving for the loss of her grandson. Her family lived close to the sea in Saleapaga, one of the worst affected areas of the tsunami tragedy. In the early morning, as was usual for their family, she and her grandchildren would wake and then go about their morning rituals. This morning was no different. She recalled how she had given some coins to her grandchildren to get some goodies at the local store. She remembers them going to the store, playing on the way. The next thing she recalls was the emergency warning for all to go to higher ground.

In the chaos of trying to locate her grandchildren she remembers the roaring sound of the wave, screeching towards them with driving rage, as if belching from the bowels of hell, whistling eerily, taunting death and destruction. This grandmother tells of how she yelled to her grandchildren who were nearby to run for their lives. Being a big lady she knew she would slow them down if they were to run together. As she tried to move herself along as quickly as possible, she was horrified to see her young seven year old grandson come back for her. He grabbed her hand tightly and pleaded, “Sau, ta o” (Come with me). Realising that the young boy was not going to leave her, she stood up, held his hand tightly and tried to move quickly. When the wave reached them, the sheer force and magnitude of it caused their hands to be ripped apart. When she recovered from the force of the wave she realised that she was no longer holding his hand and that the wave had taken him.

Amidst tears she told me of how she still sees his face, feels his hands gripping hers, hears his voice firmly telling her to hurry along. And, despite her loss and grief she decides that she owed it to him, to the strength of his love and his gesture, to keep living and be thankful for the
gift of her life. In a barely audible whisper she says, “E oo mai nei e le’i maua se tala i si au tama. Toe fia vaai tasi iai (Up till now I have not heard whether or not his body has been recovered. I just want to see him once more)”.

There is poignancy here about the arresting power of love and the fragility of life. In most families there is a close bond between grandparents and grandchildren. Theirs is a special relationship. The elderly grandmother and the young grandchild in this story represent the most vulnerable of family members. Yet the nature of their love demonstrates what is most compelling and strong of family. Here life and love is no less enduring because it is fragile and mortal. The physical power of the tsunami can not overwhelm the strength of true family loving, if anything it underlines it.

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami there are many images of the strength of family, of the pain of parents who have lost children and children who have lost parents. But nothing as heart-wrenchingly raw and vivid as the sight of a mother, at the call of a new body being found, rushing over to see if it is hers and on realising that it is, oblivious to the stench of the rotting body, hugs and kisses it as if it were newborn. The depth of the bond between mother and child is captured here. For me watching this scene, both grotesque and beautiful, my stomach turns, my heart breaks, my legs go weak but in my mind’s eye I see the strength of the pute (or umbilical cord), the vae vae manava (sharing of body and life), that links mother and child.

On deeper reflection the tsunami not only caused death and destruction, it also gave opportunity for a reappraisal of family and societal values and a
cleansing, if you like, of that which, in the light of so much pain and grief, became peripheral, nonsensical, vain and excessive.

Let me turn to the issue of family faalavelave or to the culture of reciprocal obligations and the social stigma that is sometimes associated with it.

**Family faalavelave and social stigma**

In Samoan the word faalavelave literally means an interruption. It speaks of an interruption to the family’s usual schedule. Families would have to reorganise their day or week in order to rally family members for enough resources to meet their faalavelave obligations. In earlier times faalavelave made it possible for the burden of resourcing large family events to be shared. The belief was that participating in faalavelave were acts of reciprocity. In the ideal these acts were manifestations and demonstrations of family love and bonding. They personified the best of family loving.

Samoan custom and usage finds the *quid pro quo* principle relevant in this context. There is a common saying – ‘A e iloa a’u i Togamau, ou te iloa foi oe i Siulepa (literally meaning, if you do me a good deed in Togamau, I will reciprocate in Siulepa)’. The reciprocal performance of the custom or duty implicit in the cultural imperatives of faalavelave is not to be motivated only by what one can receive in return. Rather it should be motivated by the knowledge that if performed with the best possible motives then it will be reciprocated in time and in kind.
The disparaging comments too often associated with faalavelave today are cries for reappraisal. This is implicit in the discussion between a chief or matai of my family and his sister. This matai, who lives in Wellington, rang up his sister, and said gently: “the faalavelave is now over; I suppose you had forgotten about your contribution?” She responded: “Look here dear brother, one of my principal prayers is: Dear God, call us to heaven before our children spurn what we ask for because there are too many faalavelave!”

The tsunami has created the ideal context for reassessing faalavelave. For years now our funeral culture has been the target of fierce criticism and discussion. The focus has been on corruption, exploitation and abuse, said to be motivated by vanity and greed. In one fell swoop the tsunami imposed a context, forum and environment within which to re-examine the core values of the Samoan funeral culture.²

Sorting through the scale of destruction and the number of dead, dying and injured preoccupied the community so much after the tsunami that funerals of the deceased victims became very simple affairs. The sheer number of decomposing bodies requiring immediate burial dictated the imperatives of when to hold the funeral, how, where and who should attend. When driving past these funerals the absence of the village congregating in the falewasi [funeral house] and of the Greek chorus which usually accompanied the procession to the church then to the gravesite, was poignantly conspicuous. The paraphernalia that we have become accustomed to seeing at a Samoan funeral, especially one held in the villages, was so scaled down that one could not help but ask: how

² See the attached Tuifeamalo Tuatagaloa Annandale eulogy, which provides a different expression of the same point.
much of it do we really need? Will our funerals and their cultural imperatives lose meaning and substance if we gave to the grieving and demanded nothing or only accepted the bare minimum in return? Would the dignity of the deceased and his or her family be undermined by simple but true gestures of reciprocity?

Funerals are meant to provide relief (financially and emotionally) and do justice, i.e. dignify the memory and legacy of the deceased. Instead Samoan funerals have become very expensive and stressful, with some families getting into grave debt financially, mentally and spiritually by the end of it. The social stigma of losing face if family resources are found wanting is so great that family heads are willing to do almost anything to avoid it, including creating inter-generational debt.

The seeming ordinariness of the tsunami funerals, with the minimum fuss and bother that surrounded them, did not, however, lose any face by their simplicity. Instead they gained in that they reminded us of what really mattered. In this instance, rather than raging menace the tsunami chastened and cleansed. We might say that it forced us to front up to our vanities and cupidity, violently shaking and unmasking us of the façade and exploitations that befalls status at funerals and making profane anything other than what is fundamental to the act of celebrating life and providing relief from sorrow and pain. In a nutshell, the tsunami has forced us to ask – Are our families suffering because of our own misplaced and inflated expectations? If the answer is yes, then we must take pause to sort out why this is so.
Humour as coping mechanism

In the Pacific context humour is often used to deflect, if only for a moment, the deadening weight of pain or rejection. In the opening quote of this text, I stated that I am not an individual because I share divinity with my ancestors, the land, the seas and the skies. For indigenous Samoans the sea is kin. For those who lived near the sea before the tsunami, the sea was their friend, their provider; it was family. The trauma of the tsunami was not only felt in terms of the devastation impacted by a life-threatening force, but also in terms of the pain of being rejected and chastised by kin.

In dealing with family trauma humour offers natural relief. The ability to laugh at one-self is healthy. This applies whatever the crisis. Status and social stigma take on fresh meaning when viewed from different front seats.

In a story told by and involving a catechist – a Catholic feasoasoni – the idiosyncrasies of Samoan humour as coping mechanism is exposed. Taking full advantage of the opportunity to make a point to his wife, a very large Samoan woman, the feasoasoni becomes infectiously alive as he forgivingly exaggerates his story; delighting all in his audience, except of course his wife. The feasoasoni shares that in seeing the wave coming towards him he runs for his life, as he passes his house he sees his wife, he turns and nonchalantly says to her, as if going on an ordinary run, ‘fa’ [see you]. He then climbs up a nearby breadfruit tree and looks back towards her, she is now screaming at him to come and help her. Clinging onto his breadfruit tree trunk, he calls out to her, ‘pii mau [hold on tight]’. Then he see’s the highest ranked chief in his village, Ale,
being swirled around by the wave, he looks over at him and waves to him. He yells, ‘fa, Ale’ [good-bye Ale]. There is insight here not only into how our people are coping with the trauma of what they experienced, but also how they make their points about social roles and status and poke fun at the fragilities of our humanity.

When such natural disasters take place, worrying about social etiquette just seems silly. In sharing stories, a group of men told of how the wave took one of them, twisting and twirling him towards the sky. In the process this man, who is of significant status and mana in his village, lost the *lavalava* or sarong he was wearing and that morning he did not have any undergarments. In an uproar of laughter they explained how two of them were below, looking up at their chief swirling around in the sky, naked from his waist down, his private parts fully exposed and dancing all on their own – one part going one way, the other parts going another. In those moments one could not care less about the stigmas of society.

New times, new sources for family power and wealth, each create opportunity for shifting old or irrelevant norms and/or boundaries. Where Pacific household heads in the past could control and regulate change through stringent appeals to precedence, history, custom or tradition, today the forces of change are too great. What Pacific household heads can do is to appeal to ideals and values, those that are life-affirming, love-affirming and faith-affirming.

This does not mean we deliberately ignore the depressing challenges, negative contradictions and recurring problems that also face many Pacific families. It means that hope for a positive way out is better
generated when leadership approaches are based on strengths-based rather than deficit-based models.

My final comment reflects on the stigma of single-families and the issues of Pacific fathering. I do not pretend to be an expert in this area, far from it. But this is one of the hard issues that we as Pacific leaders must tackle if we are to keep our young men meaningfully employed and out of prison.

**Fathering and single-parenting**

I am told that in New Zealand the proportion of single-parent Pacific families has been increasing over the last 25 years. The ideals of a Samoan family find the concept of single parenting a misnomer. Samoan households are extended family settings. Kin should always be on hand to share in parenting responsibilities. In the ideal, fathers should always play a role in the care of their children. Male role models for fathers, husbands and brothers are important.

The emotional strength of men, if I may say, is sometimes underestimated. In my household it is true that women are the real power, I would dare not say otherwise. But in searching for what is best of male culture, I was struck by the physical and emotional strength of a young man in Vailoa, Aleipata, another of the villages struck by the tsunami, who battled the elements and the odds to save his family. His young wife was and still is heavily pregnant, his parents are elderly. His parents and other siblings lived in the family home right on the seashore. When the call came to go to higher ground his mother was in the village women’s committee house and his wife and father were in their
respective homes. When the wave hit he searched for his wife and parents. He saw that his wife and his father had been swept away by the wave. He swam for his wife and unborn child, then for his father and brought them all back to shore and onto higher ground. Without a second thought he then went straight back into the fury of the wave to find his mother. He risked his life but the old lady was not to be found. Such bravery takes more than just physical strength; it takes an emotional courage that is just as much a part of being male as physical prowess.

With so many of our Pacific young men in prison or youth correctional facilities and with family violence continuing to be an issue, understanding the ideals of Pacific fathering is important to the framing of appropriate solutions.

We shouldn’t be afraid of the hard questions because we see ourselves as weak or mortal failures. The lessons we may draw from the stories of the Samoa tsunami survivors is that our imperfections as humans should not demean or diminish our search for what is true and good in family. There are no perfect human beings and so no perfect families. People and thus families can only strive for perfection, for those ideals we value and which will stand the test of time.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this *fono* is to acknowledge Pasifika families’ research and to meaningfully discuss its findings. The *fono* launches valuable research into changing Pasifika household compositions, into family wellbeing, parenting, the influence and importance of Pasifika cultural values and the resilience of Pasifika families and youth, despite adversity.
Pasifika families are like flowers, they are both strong and fragile, they need constant love and tenderness to survive and grow to their blooming best. We need to nurture our young, care for our old and sick, and affirm our strong. Social stigma can stunt growth and cause disease and ill-health. In Samoa the tsunami of September 29th was potent not only for the death and destruction it caused, but also, as has been the case throughout history, for the invitation to reassess, cleanse and make anew.

Samoans will remember for some time the power of this tsunami. We will remember this one not just for the paradoxes of its rage, but more poignantly for its rallying, reaffirming and cleansing of the ideals of family. The essence of family I believe is its ability to come together in times of need. The Pasifika family extends beyond the shores of the Pacific. The love and support to Tonga and Samoa that poured in from countries all over the world demonstrates our shared humanity.

Today I want to acknowledge our kinship with New Zealand. Samoa and New Zealand share so much. We share history, culture and rugby players. We share genealogy, faith, common environment and a future.

New Zealand and Samoan family values and ties have changed so markedly over the years that the response of New Zealanders to the September 29th tragedy can only be described in terms of what would be the response of loving kin. The same must be said of Australia.

The idea that we share and believe in our kinship bond is evidenced most vividly for me by the gestures of kindness shown by different communities all around New Zealand. But for sheer impact factor, I have
been most struck by the image of the young Whangarei pre-schoolers who together with their teachers and community rallied together to carry out a hikoi to raise funds for the tsunami victims. Nothing offers as strong or as powerful a message of the heart of family as the purity of children in their gestures of love. And, nothing tests the strength and longevity of family as the legacy of Sir Maui Pomare and Sir Apirana Ngata, who fought on principle for Samoa’s behalf in the late 1920s. Each of these acts continue to grip my heart and gives power and substance to the Samoan saying – ‘O le e lave i tiga, ole ivi, le toto ma le aano. He who rallies in my hour of need is my kin.’

Soifua.

References


I was hesitant to talk last night because I was aware of Tui’s discomfort with politics, politicians and status. My reservation was allayed when Tuatagaloa asked me after the service to say something this morning. I decided to speak because I felt that his request was also hers.

Nothing becomes Tui more than the manner of her leaving. As Carol, said last night, in this tragedy she put the safety of her mother and Joe before her own – a gesture underlining selflessness and humility.

Her family admits that her funeral was carefully planned and today one senses that she’s still very much in command. She has orchestrated the time and space: the order of the rituals, liturgies and testimonies. The programme was and is: the funeral within twenty four hours of death; a quiet family service at 8pm; a funeral service at Tanumapua at 5.30am; and her burial at Siusega. All this is metaphor for moving on lest we dwell too long on death and tragedy – a salutary lesson not only for our family but also for a grieving nation.

As the wife of Tuatagaloa, she is entitled to the protocols, rituals and conventions befitting the funeral of the wife of a Falealili grandee. This includes a funeral service at the official residence of Tuatagaloa in Poutasi. But, in opting for less fanfare, Tui was and is claiming space: space for privacy. She wanted a funeral where the ambiance would be markedly different in tone and context; she simply wanted to move on with grace. Whereas she became the mainstay of the Poutasi hierarchy, in the end she preferred a quiet and private funeral.

Her outstanding gift to us was the example of how she eased her way with finesse and aplomb through the different corridors of Samoan society. She would reincarnate herself many times, sometimes all in the same day. One moment she could be entrepreneur, the next a chair of a charitable organization, or Board member of an art or culture group, or a lead person in the village women’s committee, or a delegate to an annual Malua EFKS Fono tele. All this achieved with quiet wit, thoughtfulness and grace. Through this she brought people from different persuasions and cultures together. This is high achievement.

She saw the Sinalei staff not as workers or employees to be bullied or put down but as human beings that you need to work in partnership with. She did not pretend to a knowledge or expertise that she did not have. She was quite comfortable in learning from others or from books. She was successful in the village because she had the common touch; she understood people and was humble and modest.

How did she do it? Through an innate sense of humility. Whether she knew it or not, her humility gave her an uncanny insight into what the Bible refers to in Ecclesiastes as the “vanity of vanities”.

Tui was humble yet not meek. She sought and celebrated simplicity which was not simple because of the allusions to metaphor and nuance. She was most accommodating and alluring when she stood firm on what she believed to be principle.
Tui was a deeply spiritual person. For her, God was not distant and formidable; God was always present and an integral part of loving. He was present when she planted flowers, when they sprouted, budded, blossomed, bloomed and withered. He was present in her love of animals, especially in her love for her dogs. He was truly present for her when the sun rose and set. He was present when she loved Joe, her family, friends and especially the disadvantaged. He was present when she and Joe prayed in the morning and in the evening. Knowing her, she would have prayed for the last time for the safety of Joe, her mother Anna and Tafa her mother’s nurse. I believe God heard and heeded her prayer.

If I’m struggling to capture the essence of Tui, then I invite you to take a good look at her face, her glow, her gentle smile and her sense of inner peace. That is her legacy.

I loved Tui dearly for a very simple reason: she loved Joe, and because of this love, Joe and her family and all who came in contact with her became better people.

Soifua.